DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 407 CS 510 025

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TITLE Celebrating Diversity.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (84th, New York, NY, November 21-24, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Pluralism; *Debate; Debate Format; *Diversity (Faculty); *Diversity (Student); Higher Education; *Judges; Public Speaking; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Debate Tournaments

ABSTRACT

Communication teachers and forensics coaches open up students to new ideas, to new experiences, and to new cultures best when they encourage students to explore new ideas and challenge old ones. Learning has taken place when a student comes to really understand a new concept whether through the research necessary to develop, test, and prove the assertions in a public speech, or through a full and thorough reading and understanding of the ideas of an author whose work she is going to present in an interpretation event. Students should be told about the diversity of the "audiences" they will face as speakers and interpreters, as well as the fact that not all judges will be able to put their prejudices aside and evaluate a performance on its merits. A large team which included a first-rate group of interpreters turned David Mamet's "Sexual Perversity in Chicago" into a Reader's Theater script and performed it at tournaments. They either placed first in their round or last (some judges were openly offended by the material and did not judge the performance on its merits). Students should be taught in advance about diversity as they will find it in topic choice, selection of literature, and variety of types of contestants. (RS)

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ED 428 407

Celebrating Diversity.

by Rex Gaskill

Published:

1998-11

SS 510 035

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R. Gaskill

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

I appreciated very much the thoughtful and balanced way in which Tom set forth the issues as he sees them during the "locating and defining" section of this panel. I don't want to react at this point to the first two of his stories (I may plug in to them later) but I do want to comment on the third. As is happens I was the ombudsperson of the national tournament Tom refers to and had to deal with both of these issues. While I understand Tom's concern about a "double standard" I really think they were quite different issues. In one case (the debate case--literally) it was female students concerned about the behavior or other (male) students. They rather suspected (as did I having been a debater for some years) that the reason for using the offending pictures was to gain a competitive advantage. If you can "throw" your opponent during cross-x maybe she won't ask the hard questions. If that was truly the intent, it didn't work with these women. They won the debate on their own merits. The judge wasn't even aware of the incident. What we did with the male debaters was to tell them that their behavior was considered inappropriate by the tournament staff and to ask them to apologize to the women. As an ombudsperson I considered the other situation to be much more serious. Here we had an adult professional, a coach hired by a college, doing a part of his job by serving as a judge, refusing to hear a speaker through to the end because he was "offended" by material he heard. Leaving aside the fact that I have had to bud more omns by far with this gentleman than with any other coach during the last few years, I think he was completely wrong in his approach. He should have heard the student out and used whatever criteria he felt appropriate to the event to make his judgments. That he did not do so was a professional failure on his part. I told him so. Since it made no difference as to the affected student's chance of advancement we did nothing with her except to tell her coaches what had happened. Knowing their skill I was sure they had informed their students that at a national tournament

they might get quite different reactions to controversial material. In fact they had, although I would doubt they had predicted this one.

I really do value diversity. I am glad that we are becoming a ever more diverse culture in the United States and I really believe that one of our duties as educators is to prepare our students to deal with that fact. I say that even though my personal ancestors are very much of the WASPish sort.

There is an old saw in religious circles which asserts that the function of the church is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. That may well be true about religion but I believe that the second part, afflicting the comfortable, should also be true in education and most especially in higher education. It is our function as teachers to open our students up to new ideas, to new experiences, to new cultures and subcultures and to challenge the notion that everything and everyone in the world is just like them--or should be.

As communication teachers and coaches we do that best when we encourage our students to explore new ideas and to challenge old ones. When a student comes to really understand a new concept whether through the research necessary to develop, test and prove the assertions in a public speech, or through a full and thorough reading and understanding of the ideas of an author whose work she is going to present in an interpretation event, learning has taken place. To allow our students simply to research what they already know (or think they know) and read what they have already read is not education.

If we challenge them to think new thoughts and to read new literature should we also tell them what to think and what to read? Of course not, nor should we hand them topics and pieces of literature because we think they might be "winners". That is unethical behavior on our part of quite a different type and for another panel.

Should we impose our "taste", good or bad, on our students? My answer, for myself, is no. It is not my place to impose my tastes, my beliefs or my values on my students. I can and should be able and willing to share with them what those tastes, beliefs and values are and why I hold them, but I should not expect them to be adopted.

Should we tell students about the diversity of the "audiences" they will face as speakers and interpreters? Of course! We should certainly, as good educators, tell them that they will have situations when other contestants and the critic/evaluator may completely disagree with their choice of topic, with the sources of the evidence they have used, or with the quality or appropriateness of the literature they are interpreting. So what! We are not all the same. Our race, religion, cultural traditions, gender, sexual orientation, etc. etc. etc. make us better able to hear some ideas than others. We may safely tell our students that most judges will try to put their prejudices aside and evaluate a performance on its merits in the moment, but we should also tell them that that will not **always** be the case.

As a gay man I have great difficulty hearing homophobic ideas defended. As a non-Christian (a Unitarian/Universalist) I have considerable difficulty with folks within the Christian tradition who assume that there is only one true religion which everyone in the world must accept. My Universalist ancestors broke off from the New England Calvinist orthodoxy over just such issues. As a critic/judge I feel quite free on a ballot to challenge those kinds of assumptions when I hear them presented in a speech, but I also feel that I need to hear the speech and make my evaluation on the relative merits of the whole speech in relationship to the other speeches against which it competes. I'm free to disagree and to remind others that we don't all agree. My duty as a judge is evaluate any speech or selection on **all** of its elements.

A story from my past as a coach. Quite early on in my tenure at Normandale we had a large team which included a first-rate group of interpers. Reader's Theater was a popular event in those days and this group of students brought an idea to me. They had found a script for one of David Mamet's early works, a one-act called *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. I had seen a production and knew the script fairly well. Like most of Mamet it contains graphic language and a variety of sexual references. It is also a very good play. The students wanted to cut it into a RT script keeping the author's intent and flavor. They asked my "permission" and my help. I knew they would do both the cutting and the presentation well. I immediately agreed to help but not before I talked with them frankly about their audience. I told them that if the quality of the presentation was as good as I knew them to be capable of making it, they would still likely run in to judges who would give them last place based on the material itself. If they were OK with that they we would proceed. They said they were and we did. In those days there were usually three RT's in a round. I don't think they ever got a 2nd place. They often got lst including once at a tournament in Chicago from a member of the original cast. They also fairly often got 3rd and some judges were openly offended by the material. Did they learn from the experience? You bet, and they were never sorry that they had gone forward with the program. Neither was I.

We do not all agree.
We are not all the same.
We do not all have the same attitudes, values, experiences, convictions, presuppositions.
We will never come to an agreement as to "bad taste" because your "bad taste" may be exactly what my taste buds savor.

I'll admit that it's easy for me to come to and support this position. I have what amounts to tenure at a state supported public college with a strong faculty union contract. Unlike Tom's situation, if my vice president came to a final round he

would probably not be upset, but if he was I wouldn't be very concerned about it. If our program is threatened (and if often is) it always has to do with money.

On Tom's other issue, that of student reaction, my every inclination as an educator is to say, embrace the "teachable moment". Teach your students in advance about diversity as they will find it in topic choice, selection of literature, variety of types of contestants and even the existence of heretic, gay, liberal judges. Actually I think I know Tom well enough to be certain that he does all that and does it well. The world all of our students (whether they get their education in secular public institutions or sectarian private ones) will face when they leave us will not be made up of people just like them or just like us. It will not always be to our taste, good or bad. It will be full of diversity and so should forensics be.

As I wrote this it began to sound (to me at least) more and more like a sermon. So, here ends the homily. May it be so.